

VZCZCXYZ0020
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSF #0712/01 3111432
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 061432Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5533
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEADWD/DA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO IMMEDIATE 1003

C O N F I D E N T I A L SOFIA 000712

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/04/2028
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [BU](#)
SUBJECT: DASD ZAKHEIM PROPOSES ADDITIONAL BULGARIAN ISAF
CONTRIBUTIONS

REF: REF SOFIA 684

Classified By: Ambassador McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. DASD Zakheim expressed appreciation for Bulgaria's strong and sustained participation in Iraq and Afghanistan and stressed the need for a plan to increase Bulgarian contributions to ISAF as its Iraq mission ends this December. Bulgaria currently has 470 soldiers in Afghanistan (up from 80 in 2006), most of whom are in Kandahar. In February 2008, Bulgaria plans to deploy its first Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT) in cooperation with the Tennessee National Guard. DASD Zakheim proposed the Bulgarians provide an additional two OMLTs (of the Kandak variety) in late 2009. As a longer-term goal, he asked the Bulgarians to consider consolidation of their forces in Afghanistan to create a single battalion-sized force. The Bulgarians agreed with the principle of increasing contributions in Afghanistan once their withdrawal from Iraq is complete and suggested starting a working group with embassy staff to discuss plans for consolidation of their ISAF forces. The primary obstacles for Bulgaria are very tight budgets and next year's general elections. Both sides agreed on the importance of sustained dialogue to identify what resources Bulgaria would need the United States to provide to make both the short and long-term goals possible. End Summary.

SHORT TERM: TWO MORE OMLTs

¶2. (C) In October 30 discussions with the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and President's and Prime Minister's staffs, DASD Zakheim noted the critical shortage of OMLTs in Afghanistan and asked the Bulgarians to consider adding two additional teams in 2009. He urged that these be "Kandak" OMLTs, assigned to mentor a battalion-size unit of the Afghan National Army in the field, rather than the "garrison" type OMLT the Bulgarians will deploy in February 2009. The Bulgarians said this proposal would have to be reviewed at the highest level, but they supported the concept. Representatives from the Ministry of Defense noted that it would be desirable to get some feedback from the results of the first Bulgarian OMLT before a final commitment was made on an additional two. The U.S. side agreed and stressed the importance of planning now so that U.S. support for training, equipment and transportation could be arranged in advance.

¶3. (C) The Bulgarians noted their offer to provide two MI-17s to NATO, with crews and maintenance teams, if a partner nation would agree to fund the necessary refurbishments. Initially they understood the UK or France would pay. Now the situation is less clear, so the

Bulgarians are looking for U.S. assistance to help ensure that a deal gets done. They are also concerned about sustainment and maintenance costs once the helos are in place.

LONG TERM: CONSOLIDATION INTO A BATTALION

¶4. (C) DASD Zakheim noted that Bulgaria's 470 troops in Afghanistan are spread across three regional commands and are embedded with at least four different partner nations. This not only creates logistical difficulties, but it adds support and transportation expenses for Bulgaria. More critically, because Bulgarian forces are not leading units in Afghanistan, it prevents them developing leadership and command experience. This lowers the profile of Bulgarian contributions to ISAF in comparison to other nations that are leading PRTs or commanding maneuver battalions. While it is not possible to accomplish immediately, Zakheim requested that Bulgaria agree to a long-term goal of consolidating its troops into a battalion-sized force and begin consultations with us on how to make this a reality. The Bulgarians accepted the desirability of consolidation and shared concern that most of their forces were in defensive positions and were almost never in command. The President's Chief of Staff noted that when ISAF operations began, Bulgarian soldiers had very little experience in expeditionary operations, so they thought it best to embed their forces with allies. Now that they have more experience, they should be able to consider more ambitious missions. His primary concern was that any new long-term plan for deployments to Afghanistan would have to be made by the new government after the summer 2009 elections.

¶5. (C) Several Bulgarian interlocutors identified the lack of financial resources as the largest obstacle to increasing Bulgarian contributions. Given Bulgaria's ongoing military modernization programs, potential procurements of U.S. multi-role fighters and French Corvette-class ships and the introduction of a more generous social package designed to retain professional service members, Bulgaria's defense budget is severely strained. Zakheim acknowledged these difficulties and asked that the Ministry of Defense compile a list of equipment, training, transport and other requirements for increased troop contributions so that discussions could begin on what the United States might be able to provide.

¶6. (C) Concerning modernization, Zakheim stressed the transformative value of overseas deployments, noting that many allies have discovered a greater positive impact on military transformation and modernization from deployments than from acquisitions or participation in the NATO Response Force. The Bulgarians did not dispute this. Advisor to the Prime Minister Dochev called Bulgarian participation in Iraq operations "better than any military training school." The Ministry of Defense agreed as well, but noted that U.S. assistance would be essential to making additional deployments possible.

¶7. (C) Comment: While we are a long way from a firm commitment for follow-on deployments, these formal proposals have clarified for the Bulgarians what we would like from them. That will kick start our dialogue on Bulgaria's long-term engagement in Afghanistan. Bulgaria's 2009 parliamentary elections will complicate the decision timeline, particularly for any consolidation plan. We will have the government's direct attention. To assist the Bulgarians in moving forward, the embassy will work with them to create a list of training, equipment and other requirements for deployment of the new OMLTs and eventually a consolidation of forces.

McEldowney